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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a case study of the use of the Partnership Model in the development of a film about female menopause. Not only are the film maker and the client involved in the trust based partnership relationship, but the film subjects and audience are also included in the information sharing process. Advantages of the Partnership Model include: (1) increased information sharing between client and film maker, (2) a more rewarding experience for the film subject, and (3) an early clarification of the film makers' intended use of the film versus the subject's rights and desires. (STS)

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USING THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

(A paper intended to be read in conjunction
with "Buttonpusher or Partner?"
by Gunter Pfaff)

By

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USING THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL

Now that you've read about the Partnership Model, you may be thinking, "Yes, it looks pretty good on paper. But models are ideals and real life is never ideal. Given the diversity of human nature and the certainty that if anything can go wrong, it will; what happens when one is dealing with real people and real problems during film production?" Like any good ideology, the partnership model is, in a sense, a state of mind; a basic philosophy which can help guide the decision making process when problems arise. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the way the model works in the real world is to show you how Gunter and I employed it during the production of a film we worked on at the College of Human Medicine, and to generalize from that experience. First, let me set the stage.

A woman connected with the medical schools at Michigan State University had organized a successful community workshop on the subject of female menopause. As a result, she began to see the need for a film that could disseminate similar information to a wider audience, and that could be used to stimulate discussion in future workshops.

When she approached us with her ideas, she had firm answers to the first questions we usually ask our clients: what is the purpose of the film; what informational points is the film supposed to cover; and who is the intended audience? The film, in other words, began the way all films begin, or should begin; with a list of objectives.

Now, what's the first approach that comes to mind when the task is to design a film that covers certain objectives? Possibly to write a drama which incorporates all those objectives. That would mean paying actors who would in return allow us to rehearse them, to light them, to make them up, and to tell them where and when to move and what to say. We would pay them to pretend to be people they are not; to misrepresent themselves; to be phony. And unless the filmmakers and the writers and the actors were all very very good, that phoniness would be communicated to the audience. We would have to require our audience to suspend belief, and if they could not believe the manner of the presentation, why should they believe the information being presented? In other

words, if we misrepresent the form by presenting fiction posing as fact, why should we be believed about the content?

This, of course, would be a classic example of the assembly line approach, the ideals of which are so pervasive that no matter how committed a filmmaker might be to the partnership model, he may not be able to dissuade certain clients from using it. I speak from experience.

I recall, for example, meeting with a pair of clients who brought with them a script for a narrated drama they wanted translated into film. We looked through the script and discovered a number of ideas in it which simply would not work on film. We thought of some new approaches for presenting the same information and suggested them to our clients at our next meeting. They listened politely and agreed that we had some good points, but then went on to tell us that the script had been approved by a committee and that they really couldn't make any changes at this stage. It took us a long while to actually hear what they were telling us: that we were not to be involved in any way with the design of the film. We even continued to offer suggestions confidently into the first few days of shooting. Our ideas were received with courteous puzzlement. We finally resigned ourselves to the fact that we would not get much out of the experience because we were not being allowed to put much into it. In a sense, we lost interest in the film even before the shooting was finished. We followed orders as dictated by the script and brought the film, without much motivation or enthusiasm, to completion.

The film which resulted from rigidly following the dictates of the committee-approved script, with it's filmic problems and its heavy reliance on acting and narration, probably bored its intended audience. But not because the material being covered was uninteresting. The material would have been perceived on a cognitive level and boredom is an emotional state. Film communicates on both levels, and on the emotional level, the audience senses that which did in fact happen in front of the camera. In other words, if we present actors doing their best to convince an audience that they are the people whose roles they are playing, that is exactly what the audience will see; actors doing their best. If we photograph people behaving the way they always behave, the audience will sense that authenticity. My feeling is that the audience can even sense what went on behind the camera; that something of the ideology which governed the production process is communicated at an emotional level in any given film.

At any rate, if, in a university setting, we are going to toss out the standard Hollywood solution of hiding the objectives in a written drama, we are at the point where we need to ask some very basic questions about film. For example, what is unique about it? What can be communicated better on film than with words on paper, or with actors on a stage, or with vibrating strings? Film is good at showing what really went on in front of the camera. This is a disadvantage if your purpose is to film a drama and pass it off as real life. Is film, in fact, the best medium for presenting a list of objectives and informational facts that are perfectly clear on paper? Would a simple pamphlet do just as well? Or is there a way to turn that special property of film into an advantage? Almost all the questions seem to point to one answer; the documentary approach to filmmaking.

Which sounds great if you have access to a heroin addict or to a tribe of Australian aborigines. But how does one use the documentary approach to teach women about menopause? And what about the objectives? Doesn't the inherent unpredictability of the documentary style conflict with the need to cover specific informational points? Doesn't the filmmaker eventually have to manipulate the subjects or to use a narrator reading the conventional superimposed list in order to make sure that somebody lays out the facts?

Here is what we decided to do. We asked several women who had been through or were going through menopause to talk about their experiences with it in filmed interviews. We also interviewed several health care professionals about the physiological and psycho-social aspects of it. We manipulated our subjects only in the sense that some of our questions were aimed at getting answers that would cover points in the objectives. The health care professionals were advised before the interview about some of the points we wanted to cover. But we decided to make the objectives secondary to the spontaneity. If none of our subjects told us about a certain point in the objectives, we would assume that that point didn't exist in exactly that way in the real world and we would go with what our subjects did tell us.

It's important to note that this solution grew directly out of the resources we had available for this specific film. Out client had a background in social work and was accustomed to conducting the kind of delicate and intimate interviews that were necessary. She also had a list of women who had attended the original workshop from which she could draw for possible interview candidates.

Using the partnership model, solutions to design problems often are determined by resources available for a specific film, giving each film its own look of individuality. The assembly line film unit is likely to use the same formula for designing all films, giving them a look of uniformity, regardless of the subject matter.

After sending out questionnaires to find women who were interested in being interviewed on film, our client telephoned and visited each woman in her home and built up a warm and trusting relationship with each. When we filmmakers arrived on the day of the interview with all our movie making paraphernalia, we were welcomed into each woman's home like old friends.

You can now begin to see the delicate inter-relationships that are being set up. The subject trusts the filmmakers because of her relationship with the client. If the filmmaker in any way exploits the subject he ruins the subject's relationship with the client and the client's relationship with himself. The client, filmmaker, subject and audience can begin to be seen as an ecosystem where the ripping off of one person by another is bound to backfire, just as surely as dumping PBB in Michigan cattle feed so as not to decrease profits, assures the dumper that somewhere down the road he will be eating PBB for supper. Because of this interdependence, the partnership model emphasizes the importance of the individual. It forces those administrators who are accustomed to thinking of employees as interchangeable parts to realize that clients and filmmakers involved in such projects as the menopause film are unique and irreplaceable human beings. They are made so by the element of trust. The subjects of a partnership film do not agree to be filmed for money. They agree because they trust the filmmaker and client who must in turn be able to assure the subjects that, barring a true catastrophy, they will edit and carry the film through to completion themselves.

This concern with trust extends even to the audience. For example, we once made a film in which medical students and community physicians role-played some scenes that had been roughly scripted ahead of time. We included one scene of me as the sound man using a clapboard to assure the audence that we knew that they knew that what they were seeing was play-acting.

My attempt up to this point has been to demonstrate how the partnership model can be put to use in the real world by showing you how it guided us during the production of a real film. I would like to conclude by talking about what seem to be, based on my experience, the three most significant differences

between the Pecking-Order/Assembly-Line Model and the Partnership Model. The first of these major differences has the greatest effect on the client-filmmaker relationship and has to do with the sharing of information. The second deals with their relationship with the subject and with the subject's implied question, "What's in it for me?" Finally I would like to talk about the issue of informed consent.

In the Assembly-line/Pecking-order model, participants quite often withhold information about their craft or area of expertise from others working with them. Why should the client need to know about filmmaking as long as his message comes across in the final film? Why should the sound man be informed about the subject matter of the film? He only needs to read the script to be able to do his job. Since the bosses in a pecking-order film crew find it demeaning to ask for advice or information from those under them, they need to pretend omniscience. And, not sharing information about one's craft may be the only mechanism by which a person being treated as a cog in a machine can hold on to his sense of autonomy. The whole cycle tends to produce feelings of competition, inferiority, and animosity.

In our film and video experience with the partnership model, on the other hand, we have found sharing information back and forth with our clients to be essential. It's probably fairly obvious why the filmmaker needs to know about the subject matter of the film. The client, for example, knowing so much about the content, may see every foot of film as important and may want to use it all. The filmmaker, in the editing stage, will need to be able to balance a feeling for the aesthetics of his film with a basic knowledge of the subject matter in order not to cut out important information, or get sidetracked into including extraneous material. This means that the filmmaker needs to hike to the library or bookstore and that he needs to learn as much as he can from his client, as well.

What may not be so obvious is that the client also needs to learn about filmmaking.

The client needs to know what the filmmaker can do .... what is difficult and what is easy. We made a film once which involved slow motion photography of moving horses. Our client told us that he wanted pictures of the whole horse. We kept pressing him to tell us more about what he really wanted the footage to show. We finally found out that he was mainly interested in the movements of the joints of the front legs.

We talked him into letting us use a little film to try some close-ups of the front legs. The footage turned out to be better for his purposes than he had eve thought was possible. Because he had assumed it would be too difficult to zoom in on the front legs of a fast moving horse, our client had really never conceived the idea of a close-up, and so, never asked for it. It was only by our taking the initiative to show him something about filmmaking and its potentials that he was able to ask for the footage he really needed.

Similarly, the members of the Interactional Analysis Laboratory, a group of researchers, media people, and graduate students interested in analyzing behavior recordeo on video tapes and films, have been able to work closely together over time and have had many opportunities to teach each other. For example, one of the researchers in the group was interested in taking video tapes of resident doctors interacting with their patients and supervisors. While I was running the camera, my instructions were to follow the interaction. But sometimes all the interactants were too numerous or too far apart to fit into the frame. In such cases, my instructions were to follow the resident. But if the patients were exhibiting interesting behaviors, I would miss them. In short, there were really no hard and fast rules to follow; I simply needed to have a feel for what the researcher wanted. So he became the camera man during one afternoon. He and I analyzed the footage he had shot to give me a better idea of what he was after. And he did a very interesting thing that day. The resident had been standing quite close to his patient until his supervisor (the attending physician) came into the room to evaluate the resident's performance. After the supervisor left, the resident seated himself completely across the room from the patient and began writing prescriptions and bringing his records up to date. The researcher did something I never would have thought of, which was to make painfully slow pans back and forth from the patient, across the empty space to the resident and back again, to emphasize the distance between them. These pictures explained to me, better than any words could have, what he was after. It also made me wonder if in general, the best person to choose for camera person would be the so called "client" himself. But it turned out that he is not the best person to choose. Because upon reviewing the tape he had shot, the researcher was able to see many things going on in the room that he had been totally unaware of while he was shooting. He found that the amount of concentration required to do the technical job of shooting tape drained his powers of observation and did not allow him to do his real job of monitoring the interactions going on in the room.

What he and I did was a simple exercise which allowed us to understand more about each other's functions ... I learned about his way of seeing and he learned about the tunnel-vision effect of hassling with the video equipment. But I think the example shows how sharing information not only leads to friendship, understanding, and mutual respect, but also makes available tools other than words for communicating concepts.

The second major difference between the Pecking-Order and the Partnership models involves the subject and the question he might well ask, "What's in it for me?" The filmmaker and the client have obvious reasons for producing their film or tape. But the subject who literally **subjects** himself to camera, microphone, and a disruption in his life is essentially doing them a favor. The Pecking-Order people would either pay their actors or simply **use** unpaid subjects. But the unpaid subject is bound to feel resentment sooner or later unless some reward is built into the process for him. One of the ways in which the researcher I mentioned earlier built a reward into his project was by organizing tape viewing sessions for the medical residents and supervisors, who were the subjects of his tapes. They were invited to make observations about anything they saw in the tapes and the researcher served as facilitator for the discussions. Many of the residents and supervisors found the tapes valuable in helping them to see aspects of their behavior that they were not aware of and found that the non-judgemental nature of the sessions allowed for self-criticism and improvement.

The issue of the subject's rights is one which every maker of documentary (or ethnographic) films and tapes needs to wrestle with. No matter how humanistic his philosophy of dealing with the subject may be, the filmmaker needs to make it mesh with the legal requirement to obtain a record of informed consent from the subject. Usually this means asking the subject to sign a release form which gives the filmmaker the right to do pretty much anything he wants to do with the subject's image. The apparent conflict between the need to build a trusting relationship with the subject and the need to ask him to practically sign his life away, leads to opinions ranging from one end of the rainbow to the other on the topic of how to handle release forms. For example, we once made a videotaped documentary for a client in which we shot medical students and faculty members teaching and learning in small groups of 10 or 12. We decided for that project not to have anyone sign a release form until the tape was edited and everyone involved brought together for a viewing. Assuming everyone was satisfied with the way he or she was represented, each person could sign a release form following the viewing. If anyone was dissatisfied, we would have to re-edit until that person

was happy. This was a very unconventional way to handle release forms, but we felt it was the best way to insure the protection of everybody's rights and feelings. What we didn't know was that one of the faculty members had originally expressed to our client, his reluctance about being video taped. Our client, without telling us, had assured him, in order to allay his fears, that the video tape would not be edited in any way: that the tape would be seen only by her and her research assistants. When that faculty member was subsequently invited to a public showing of the edited tape, he understandably refused to attend, insisting in fact, that his face and voice be removed from the tape wherever it appeared.

And to demonstrate an equally unconventional view about release forms at the other end of the rainbow, this incident prompted a suggestion that all medical students and faculty members be required to sign a blanket release form, allowing themselves to be filmed or taped at any time and for any purpose as a prerequisite to entering or being hired by the medical school.

The real issue, of course, involved more than simply deciding when a release form should be signed. The faculty member was perfectly within his rights to refuse to be video taped and if we had known of his objections from the beginning we could have arranged to exclude him from the picture or to select a different small group to tape. As a result we not only had to spend weeks doing some very complicated re-editing which weakened the final tape, but we angered someone by betraying his trust.

In our medical school setting, we are trying to establish a reputation that will allow us to enlist the future cooperation of students, and members of the faculty and administration. We are working towards the day when people who have seen our films and tapes or who have talked to people we've worked with, will drop by and volunteer for any interesting projects we get involved in. We can't afford to burn any bridges.

For this reason we have adapted a few unwritten rules which don't appear on any release form. First, we try to make sure that both the so-called "media expert" and "content expert" meet with the subject initially. The two partners working together have the best access to the subject's apprehensions, both about being filmed and about the specific project. Secondly, we give the subject unconditional veto rights over the film or tape at the time of filming.

The subject usually feels more at ease if he knows that he can erase the tape or ask us not to use the film if he is embarrassed or unhappy about his performance. Thirdly, we put the name of the project at the top of the release form so that we can assure the subject that the footage will not be used for any other purpose, without an explicit additional negotiation for permission. And finally, we try to build a reward for the subject into a project by including him into the partnership and offering him a look at the fascinating and otherwise hidden process of film and video tape production, from beginning to end.

I think it is clear that if you enjoy working with people you will like the partnership approach. We have made lasting friendships with our clients and subjects and in some cases, turned their careers in the direction of media production. We have had chances to rap with our audiences and they have occasionally dropped by to visit with us. We feel that the attempt to stay honest, which is at the heart of the partnership approach, will be appreciated by the audience and that that ideology at some level will be communicated to them.